

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

of

Stephen H. Strange

and

Alan L. Rowe

for a

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR FAST REBOOT OF A FILE SERVER

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SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR FAST REBOOT OF A FILE SERVER

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to networked data storage systems, and more particularly to
5 reboot techniques for storage system file servers.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A file server is a computer that provides file service relating to the organization of
information on storage devices, such as disks. The file server or *filer* includes a storage
operating system that implements a file system to logically organize the information as a
10 hierarchical structure of directories and files on the disks. Each "on-disk" file may be
implemented as a set of data structures, e.g., disk blocks, configured to store information.
A directory, on the other hand, may be implemented as a specially formatted file in which
information about other files and directories are stored.

A filer may be further configured to operate according to a client/server model of
15 information delivery to thereby allow many clients to access files stored on a server, e.g.,
the filer. In this model, the client may comprise an application, such as a database appli-
cation, executing on a computer that "connects" to the filer over a computer network,
such as a point-to-point link, shared local area network (LAN), wide area network
(WAN), or virtual private network (VPN) implemented over a public network such as the
20 Internet. Each client may request the services of the file system on the filer by issuing
file system protocol messages (in the form of packets) to the filer over the network.

A common type of file system is a "write in-place" file system, an example of
which is the conventional Berkeley fast file system. In a write in-place file system, the
locations of the data structures, such as inodes and data blocks, on disk are typically
25 fixed. An inode is a data structure used to store information, such as meta-data, about a

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Within a known storage system, the storage operating system is loaded from a kernel image that resides in compressed form at a location on the interconnected disk array. The compressed kernel image is located on the disk array by a finder algorithm, and loaded at an appropriate location in memory. It is then extracted into an operative kernel based upon a decompression algorithm, and placed in a predetermined address space in the file server's memory.

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The full “reboot” of a file server involves, in essence, the complete shutdown and clearance of the processor and memory from a booted-up state, and (often) a recycling of system power. After shutdown, the entire system is reinitialized and the memory is reloaded with all necessary software and operating system components. A reboot sequence may be undertaken for a variety of reasons. Reboot may be required due to power-failure or hardware failure. A system error, unexpected internal software state, software bug and/or kernel “panic” condition may necessitate a reboot (in order to correct these conditions). The addition of new hardware, adapters or drivers may also necessitate reboot—particularly the attachment of new disk units to the attached disk array. Various hardware and software checks and maintenance procedures may also entail a reboot sequence.

As shutdown occurs, all applications are closed, consistency points and other closing data handling/file service activities are completed (as applicable) and connections with clients are brought down. The file server memory is then cleared by a “handoff” to the firmware, based upon a call for a “reboot” by the storage operating system. This
20 clears the final memory locations, and handles the final shutdown of processor and memory functions.

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memory address space. The locating and reading of the kernel from disk into memory may consume approximately ten seconds on a fast-running file server. Once the kernel is loaded, various hardware connections are established and checked, and tests of attached hardware may be performed (PCI/bus-based devices, for example).

5 A full or "cold" boot process as a result of a reboot command, therefore, consumes significant file server time and resources. Clearly, the more quickly a reboot is accomplished, the less time clients awaiting file service must wait for that service to resume. Because reboot time is downtime from the perspective of clients, saving even a few seconds during reboot can significantly affect overall system availability—particularly where many attached clients exist and a multiplicity of reboots may be required throughout an operating year. In fact, to attain 99.999% system reliability (the desired "Five Nines"), downtime must be limited to only about five minutes per year.

10 It is recognized that certain boot-up processes may be avoided in many circumstances, as the risk of malfunction or failure of the subject hardware and software affected by these processes is low in such instances. In other words, where a reboot is undertaken simply to (for example) add a new disk drive or license a new module in the storage operating system, it is not usually expected that there are faults with any hardware or software components. As such, tests on unaffected components and software may (for all practical purposes) safely be skipped. Other time-consuming tasks may also be skipped under certain circumstances.

15 It is therefore an object of this invention to provide a system and method for faster reboot of a file server than a conventional "cold" reboot that does not appreciably increase the risk of propagation of a software or hardware error/failure. This system and method should generally reduce downtime as a result of file server unavailability.

25 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

This invention overcomes the disadvantages of the prior art by providing a system and method for fast ("warm") reboot of a file server that skips certain conventional boot processes (e.g. "cold reboot") when circumstances warrant, in order to reduce server

downtime. In particular, time is saved by avoiding a full shutdown of the processor and memory, and by causing the firmware to refrain from a full clearance of the file server memory. Instead, the firmware accesses a retained copy of the storage operating system kernel from a reserved storage location in the file server memory so that an operative version of the kernel is reestablished at the appropriate address space in memory without requiring a time-consuming read of the kernel image from disk.

In addition, other “normal” or full reboot operations (such as full memory tests, hardware checks and memory zeroing by the firmware) are avoided as appropriate—saving further time in the overall reboot process, while still attaining the desired reinitialization of key applications and functions. The skipping of such reboot processes can be made based upon procedures written into the firmware that respond to the setting of a “warm reboot” flag in the firmware by the storage operating system as reboot is instructed. The tests and reboot procedures performed or skipped can be varied to suit a particular condition of hardware/software configuration.

In one embodiment a short-term compressed kernel image is stored in a low memory address and uncompressed/extracted into the operative storage operating system kernel in the predetermined location in memory by a boot loader within the short-term image. For the warm reboot, the short-term compressed kernel image is loaded from the reserved location—in contrast to a standard reboot in which the short-term kernel is loaded from the disk array copy. The subsequent reboot steps are the same during and after kernel extraction regardless of the source of the image (e.g. reserved memory or disk). The reserved location’s compressed kernel image is reloaded from the disk-originated short-term copy each time a full reboot occurs, thus allowing for the clearance of the entire memory (including the reserved location) by the firmware during a normal full shutdown/reboot.

The stored compressed kernel image is error-checked each time it is retrieved for reloading into the short-term image and, in turn, into the operative uncompressed kernel. If it has been corrupted, the warm reboot reverts to a full reboot, ensuring that a new, disk-originated copy of the compressed kernel image is loaded in the short-term position and, whence, stored in the reserved location.

In one embodiment, the memory, including the reserved storage location, can be refreshed using, for example, a time-based Error Correction Circuitry (ECC) “sniffer” that periodically checks for memory ECC errors. This assists in maintaining the long-term stored compressed kernel image in the reserved storage location free of corruption to its code.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above and further advantages of the invention may be better understood by referring to the following description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which like reference numerals indicate identical or functionally similar elements:

Fig. 1 is a schematic block diagram of a network environment including a file server and disk array that may be advantageously used with the present invention;

Fig. 2 is a schematic block diagram of an operating system file system layer that may be advantageously used in connection with the file server of Fig. 1;

Fig. 3 is a schematic block diagram of the file server memory showing a generalized representation of the loading of a storage operating system kernel image into the memory from disk in accordance with a “normal” reboot process;

Fig. 4 is a schematic block diagram of the file server memory showing a generalized representation of the loading of a storage operating system kernel image the memory from a stored compressed image in accordance with a “warm” reboot process; and

Fig. 5 is a flow diagram showing a warm reboot process according to an embodiment of this invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF AN ILLUSTRATIVE EMBODIMENT

Fig. 1 is a schematic block diagram of an environment 100 that includes a client 110 having one or more applications 112, and interconnected file server 120 that may be advantageously used with the present invention. The file server or “filer” 120 is a computer that provides file service relating to the organization of information on storage devices, such as disks 130. It will be understood to those skilled in the art that the inventive technique described herein may apply to any type of special-purpose computer (e.g.,

server) or general-purpose computer, including a standalone computer. The filer 120 comprises a processor 122, a memory 124, a network adapter 126 and a storage adapter 128 interconnected by a system bus 125. The filer 120 also includes a storage operating system 200 that implements a file system to logically organize the information as a hierarchical structure of directories and files on the disks. A console or other user interface 129 is provided to control various filer functions, including those implemented according to this invention, and report on the status of filer operations.

In the illustrative embodiment, the memory 124 comprises storage locations that are addressable by the processor and adapters for storing software program code. A portion of the memory may be further organized as a "buffer cache" 135 for storing data structures that are passed between disks and the network during normal runtime operation. The memory comprises a form of random access memory (RAM) that is generally cleared by a power cycle or other reboot operation (e.g. it is a "volatile" memory). The processor and adapters may, in turn, comprise processing elements and/or logic circuitry configured to execute the software code and manipulate the data structures. The operating system 200, portions of which are typically resident in memory and executed by the processing elements, functionally organizes the filer by, *inter alia*, invoking storage operations in support of a file service implemented by the filer. It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that other processing and memory means, including various computer readable media, may be used for storing and executing program instructions pertaining to the inventive technique described herein.

The network adapter 126 comprises the mechanical, electrical and signaling circuitry needed to connect the filer 120 to a client 110 over a computer network 140, which may comprise a point-to-point connection or a shared medium, such as a local area network. The client 110 may be a general-purpose computer configured to execute applications 112, such as a database application. Moreover, the client 110 may interact with the filer 120 in accordance with a client/server model of information delivery. That is, the client may request the services of the filer, and the filer may return the results of the services requested by the client, by exchanging packets 150 encapsulating, e.g., the CIFS protocol or NFS protocol format over the network 140.

The storage adapter 128 cooperates with the operating system 200 executing on the filer to access information requested by the client. The information may be stored on the disks 130 of a disk array that is attached, via the storage adapter 128 to the filer 120 or other node of a storage system as defined herein. The storage adapter 128 includes
5 input/output (I/O) interface circuitry that couples to the disks over an I/O interconnect arrangement, such as a conventional high-performance, Fibre Channel serial link topology. The information is retrieved by the storage adapter and, if necessary, processed by the processor 122 (or the adapter 128 itself) prior to being forwarded over the system bus 125 to the network adapter 126, where the information is formatted into a packet and re-
10 turned to the client 110.

Notably, the Filer 120 includes an NVRAM 160 that provides fault-tolerant backup of data, enabling the integrity of filer transactions to survive a service interruption based upon a power failure, or other fault. The size of the NVRAM depends in part upon its implementation and function in the file server. It is typically sized sufficiently to log a
15 certain time-based chunk of transactions (for example, several seconds worth). The NVRAM is filled, in parallel with the buffer cache, after each client request is completed, but before the result of the request is returned to the requesting client.

In an illustrative embodiment, the disk array 132 is arranged as a plurality of separate volumes each having a file system associated therewith, as described further.
20 The volumes each include one or more RAID groups of disks 130. In one embodiment the RAID groups can each include independent physical disks 130 including those storing striped data and those storing separate parity for the data, in accordance with a preferred RAID 4 configuration. However, other configurations (e.g. RAID 5 having distributed parity across stripes) are also contemplated. In this embodiment, a minimum of one par-
25 ity disk and one data disk is employed. However, a typical implementation may include three data and one parity disk per RAID group, and a multiplicity of RAID groups per volume.

Notably, the Filer 120 includes an NVRAM 160 that provides fault-tolerant backup of data, enabling the integrity of filer transactions to survive a service interruption
30 based upon a power failure, or other fault. The size of the NVRAM is variable. It is

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In addition to the above-described NVRAM, a firmware storage device 170 (referred to generally as the “firmware” or “FW”) is operatively interconnected with the filer’s (120) components. The firmware 170 includes a basic instruction set stored on a non-volatile memory, such as a flash memory (a PC card-based compact flash, for example). The firmware is thus readily rewritten on the flash to account for updates and changes in the underlying code. The storage operating system directs the rewriting of the flash through an appropriate application. A bus interface (not shown) allows the firmware to communicate over the system bus 125. This bus interface can be based on a variety of protocols, such as a Peripheral Component Interface (PCI) standard or Integrated Device Electronics (IDE) standard. Notably, the firmware provides the most-basic instruction set to restart a cold (uninitialized and/or powered-down) system, and to perform the final steps in bringing-down the system when a more-comprehensive instruction set (in the form of a storage operating system kernel) is not present.

To facilitate generalized access to the disks 130 on the array 132, the storage operating system 200 implements a write-anywhere file system that logically organizes the information as a hierarchical structure of directories and files on the disks. Each “on-disk” file may be implemented as a set of disk blocks configured to store information, such as data, whereas the directory may be implemented as a specially formatted file in which other files and directories are stored. As noted above, in the illustrative embodiment described herein, the operating system is preferably the NetApp® Data ONTAP™

operating system available from Network Appliance, Inc., Sunnyvale, California that implements the Write Anywhere File Layout (WAFL™) file system. It is expressly contemplated that any appropriate file system can be used, and as such, where the term "WAFL" is employed, it should be taken broadly to refer to any file system that is otherwise adaptable to the teachings of this invention.

Again to summarize, as used herein, the term "storage operating system" generally refers to the computer-executable code operable on a storage system that implements file system semantics (such as the above-referenced WAFL) and manages data access. In this sense, Data ONTAP software is an example of such a storage operating system implemented as a microkernel. The storage operating system can also be implemented as an application program operating over a general-purpose operating system, such as UNIX® or Windows NT®, or as a general-purpose operating system with configurable functionality, which is configured for storage applications as described herein.

The organization of the preferred storage operating system for the exemplary filer is now described briefly. However, it is expressly contemplated that the principles of this invention can be implemented using a variety of alternate storage operating system architectures.

As shown in Fig. 2, the storage operating system 200 comprises a series of software layers, including a media access layer 210 of network drivers (e.g., an Ethernet driver). The operating system further includes network protocol layers, such as the Internet Protocol (IP) layer 212 and its supporting transport mechanisms, the Transport Control Protocol (TCP) layer 214 and the User Datagram Protocol (UDP) layer 216. A file system protocol layer provides multi-protocol data access and, to that end, includes support for the CIFS protocol 218, the NFS protocol 220 and the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) protocol 222. In addition, the storage operating system 200 includes a disk storage layer 224 that implements a disk storage protocol, such as a RAID protocol, and a disk driver layer 226 that implements a disk access protocol such as, e.g., a Small Computer Systems Interface (SCSI) protocol.

Bridging the disk software layers with the network and file system protocol layers is a file system layer 280 of the storage operating system 200. Generally, the layer 280

implements a file system having an on-disk format representation that is block-based using, e.g., 4-kilobyte (KB) data blocks and using inodes to describe the files. In response to transaction requests, the file system generates operations to load (retrieve) the requested data from volumes 134 if it is not resident "in-core", i.e., in the filer's memory

5 124. If the information is not in memory, the file system layer 280 indexes into the inode file using the inode number to access an appropriate entry and retrieve a logical volume block number. The file system layer 280 then passes the logical volume block number to the disk storage (RAID) layer 224, which maps that logical number to a disk block number and sends the latter to an appropriate driver (for example, an encapsulation

10 of SCSI implemented on a fibre channel disk interconnection) of the disk driver layer 226. The disk driver accesses the disk block number from volumes 134 and loads the requested data in memory 124 for processing by the filer 120. Upon completion of the request, the filer (and storage operating system) returns a reply, e.g., a conventional acknowledgement packet defined by the CIFS specification, to the client 110 over the net-

15 work 140.

The firmware 170 is shown in connection with the storage operating system 200 residing beneath the disk layer (Fig. 2). The firmware thus interacts with the disks and operating system in a manner to be described further below. In addition, a system timer 290 and an Error Correction Circuit (ECC) "sniffer" 292 are shown according to an em-

20 bodiment of this invention. These functional components of the storage operating system are described in further detail below. In general, they are responsible for performing periodic ECC bit-checking operations on the filer's memory array, using an appropriate working thread, to ensure correct storage of bits.

It should be noted that the software "path" 250 through the storage operating system layers described above needed to perform data storage access for the client request received at the filer may alternatively be implemented in hardware or a combination of hardware and software. That is, in an alternate embodiment of the invention, the storage access request data path 250 may be implemented as logic circuitry embodied within a field programmable gate array (FPGA) or an application specific integrated circuit

30 (ASIC). This type of hardware implementation increases the performance of the file

service provided by filer 120 in response to a file system request packet 150 issued by client 110.

It will be understood to those skilled in the art that the inventive technique described herein may apply to any type of special-purpose computer (e.g., server) or general-purpose computer, including a standalone computer, embodied as a storage system. To that end, filer 120 can be broadly, and alternatively, referred to as storage system. Moreover, the teachings of this invention can be adapted to a variety of storage system architectures including, but not limited to, a network-attached storage environment, a storage area network and disk assembly directly-attached to a client/host computer. The term “storage system” should, therefore, be taken broadly to include such arrangements.

Fig. 3 graphically represents the filer memory 124 undergoing a full or “cold” reboot process according to an embodiment of this invention. When a full reboot instruction is issued to the storage operating system, the above-described shutdown occurs, in which the memory is cleared by the firmware 170 after it is instructed to do so. In this instance a flag 302 (to be described further below) is set to instruct a full reboot (cold reboot) of the system. All normal reboot shutdown operations are performed including the complete clearance of the memory 124 including all versions of the kernel, in both compressed and uncompressed form.

Once clearance is complete, the boot-up process begins. The firmware 170 begins various standard POST activities, memory scan, various hardware tests (LCD and SIO chips 180 in Fig. 1). The firmware then searches (arrow 303) for a compressed image (304) of the storage operating system kernel on one or more disks 130 of the array using an appropriate algorithm/application. The on-disk compressed kernel image 304 is stored in one or more files on one or more disks (see for example Fig. 1).

The firmware facilitates the reading (arrow 306) of the compressed kernel image 304 into the memory 124, at a predetermined (typically) “low” address value 308. This becomes a short-term version of the compressed kernel image (309). When an appropriate action by the firmware is completed (such as the jumping back to the start value—arrow 311), the compressed image undergoes a conventional self-extraction procedure 310. The extracted, operative version of the storage operating system kernel (312) is loaded

into a predetermined address space 314, that is within the unreserved area of the filer memory 124. Note that a reserved memory space 316 is also established. This space includes a table of contents 318 containing pointers to predetermined memory locations, and its role is described in further detail below.

5 Once the operative kernel 312 is established in its predetermined address space, it is started, and takes over additional boot-up operations from the firmware 170. In addition, the memory space 308 occupied by the in-memory compressed kernel image 309 is freed (indicated by cross-block 320) for overwrite.

10 With reference now to the representation of the memory 124 in Fig. 4 and the associated flow diagram in Fig. 5, a warm reboot process in accordance with an embodiment of this invention is now described in detail. The process 500 (Fig. 5) begins when an action occurs that warrants a reboot, but does not require a full reboot. One type of warm reboot condition involves the direct instruction from an operator via the filer console/interface 129. This may be in preparation for adding a new licensed software module or attaching a new disk drive. Conversely, a warm reboot can be initiated by certain
15 internal storage operating system "panic" conditions, such as a detected software bug, unexpected internal software state or a hardware error that can be cleared by rebooting (a multi-disk failure for example). Note that certain types of errors that are fatal to the storage operating system, such as power cycles, halts, panics during booting, machine checks and instruction faults require resort to a normal "cold" boot.
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 A valid internal or external warm reboot instruction (see 442 in Fig. 4) within the storage operating system kernel is issued (step 502 in Fig. 5), directs the flag 302 in the firmware 170 to be set to a value (see also Fig. 4) indicating an impending warm reboot process (step 504). This flag can be a bit, or other data structure. At this time, the storage operating system performs certain shutdown procedures, including the above-
25 described "handoff" to the firmware 170, in accordance with step 506. The firmware does not completely shut down the power, memory and processor. It does cause the reload the storage operating system kernel in accordance with generalized reboot procedures. The loading is from a compressed kernel image in the reserved the reserved space
30 316.

As noted above, the highest-value address space 316 is reserved, and not cleared by either the operating system or firmware at this time. Within this space 316 is located a table of contents 318 (sized approximately 512 bytes) storing various pointers to reserved information within the space 316 used by the firmware 170. The space 316 is not accessible to the storage operating system during normal operations. The firmware 170 accesses (arrow 410) the table of contents 318 and, in accordance with step 508, locates the address of a stored version of the compressed kernel image (420). This version is a copy of the compressed image 304 contained on-disk, and the version loaded into memory during a cold reboot (as the short-term compressed kernel image 309). Because the stored compressed kernel image is located in the reserved memory, it is not lost by action of the storage operating system during shut down/reboot, as this area is not generally visible to the kernel. Accordingly, in a warm reboot where the firmware 170 prevents full shutdown, the information in the reserved space, including the stored compressed kernel image 420, is retained.

Before discussing the warm reboot process 500 further, the loading of the stored compressed kernel image is discussed in further detail. When a full boot-up occurs, a boot loader 350 (refer to Fig. 3) that resides at the beginning of the short-term kernel image 309 instructs a copy of the on-disk compressed kernel image to be copied (dashed arrow 352) to the reserved space 316, and its location be noted in the table of contents 318. This occurs, typically, after the short-term compressed kernel image 309 is loaded to the low address space location 308, but before extraction (310) of the operative storage operating system kernel occurs. According to one embodiment, the firmware and/or storage operating system may include additional checking/update functions that ensure that the stored compressed kernel image remains intact, and if it becomes corrupted, that a new copy will be directed to the reserved space. As a minimum it is generally contemplated that a new stored kernel image is loaded in the reserved space each time a cold reboot occurs.

Referring again to the procedure 500, the firmware accesses (arrow 422) the stored compressed kernel image 420, and performs a checksum (or other error-checking protocol) on the kernel image in accordance with step 510. In accordance with decision

step 512, if the stored compressed kernel image 420 is corrupted, the warm reboot ceases and the firmware resets the flag 302, reverting to a normal cold reboot process (step 514). In the manner described generally above, the shutdown procedure ensues, and a reboot with all applicable tests occurs. In addition, a new on-disk compressed image of the kernel (304) is loaded, and a copy is placed in the reserved space 316 (step 516). Finally, the operative kernel is extracted, and loaded at its predetermined address space, while the space storing the short-term compressed kernel image is freed (step 518).

Conversely, if the stored compressed kernel image 420 is intact, the decision step 512 branches to step 520. The stored compressed kernel image is written to the predetermined address space 308 normally occupied by the disk-read compressed kernel image 309 (as compressed kernel image 430). As with a cold reboot (Fig. 3), the short-term compressed kernel image 430 is extracted (310) and loaded at the predetermined address space 314 as the operative storage operating system kernel 432 (step 522). This occurs based upon the above-described self-extraction procedure in which the firmware 170 jumps (arrow 440) to the first address of the compressed kernel image 430. Note that this multi-copy approach enables other functionalities within the operating system and firmware to remain relatively unaffected, as only the origin of the short-term compressed kernel image (disk or reserved space) is altered. It is contemplated, according to an alternate embodiment, that the stored compressed kernel image can be directly extracted from the reserved space into the desired address space (314). Likewise, the kernel can be uncompressed in storage, or only partially compressed according to an alternate embodiment.

Once the storage operating system kernel 432 is loaded, it starts normal operations (step 524). While the full clearance (zeroing) of the memory by the firmware is typically skipped in the warm reboot process, a clearance of memory locations is instead performed on an as-needed basis by the kernel, once the kernel is established (uncompressed and extracted) in its predetermined address space. Likewise, the address space 308 storing the short-term compressed kernel image 430 is now freed, as the compressed image is no longer required.

It is generally contemplated that the compressed kernel image is stored on a form of "non-removable" storage media in each instance according to an embodiment of this

invention. That is, the image in the reserved storage location is on a first non-removable (typically volatile) storage media, namely the file server's random access memory (RAM). The image is alternately stored on a second non-removable (typically non-volatile) storage media, namely the disk array. It is contemplated that the types of storage media in each instance can vary from those described, but that they are generally fixed with respect to the system (including so-called "hot-swappable" disk implementations). They would typically not include so-called "boot-disks" stored on floppy media, CD-ROMs, and the like. In addition the kernel image in one of the media is generally more-quickly accessible than the standard media used for storing the kernel image (traditional on-disk storage, for example), advantageously reducing access time.

In addition, it is expressly contemplated, according to an alternate embodiment, that the firmware's warm reboot flag can be a multi-state indicator capable of directing different "levels" of warm reboot, depending upon the prevailing conditions. In other words, the flag 302 includes an optional "level" value (450 in Fig. 4), potentially represented by a two-or more-bit flag. The storage operating system can be adapted to set the level based upon a given condition. If certain hardware errors, for example, are more likely under certain conditions, a given test (that would otherwise be skipped) can be re-introduced into the warm reboot. The control of the level of warm reboot can, likewise be input by the operator when he or she directs a warm reboot.

Since a file server may not experience a full reboot for several days, weeks or, possibly, months as an advantageous consequence of the warm reboot process of this invention, it is contemplated that the stored compressed kernel image may reside in the reserved space for a significant time period, unchanged. This may tax the ability of most Synchronous Dynamic Random Access Memory (SDRAM) or other memory to retain the data. Such memory is often provided with error checking, refresh and repair capabilities, such as ECC. This circuitry searches out single-bit errors before they can become potentially fatal double-bit errors. However, these functions are often only carried out at full reboot. Accordingly, it is contemplated that the timer function can be called to control an ECC "sniffer" application that searches out single-bit errors according to a gradual programmed schedule. According to one embodiment, the ECC sniffer passes

over the entire memory space (including the reserved space) once per day, in, for example, clusters of a few kilobytes every few minutes. The schedule for maintenance of the memory, however, is highly variable.

The foregoing has been a detailed description of illustrative embodiments of the invention. Various modifications and additions can be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. For example, a variety of reboot procedures and tests, other than those discussed herein, may be included and/or omitted in a warm reboot process according to this invention. Likewise, the general structure of the file server memory, and the locations of various copies of the compressed and/or uncompressed kernel can be varied. In addition, the stored kernel image may be located directly on the firmware storage device. This may be a compressed copy or an uncompressed copy. In any case, the copy (wherever stored) is made available for loading to memory when a warm reboot occurs according to an illustrative embodiment. It is also expressly contemplated that the procedure described herein can be adapted to revert from a warm reboot to a cold reboot if, for any reason, the performance of the warm reboot is detected as causing potential harm to the software or hardware of the system. Appropriate fault-detection protocols can be implemented to generate a full reboot command when needed. Further reference to a firmware is only one type of arrangement, and the term as used herein should be taken broadly to include any acceptable "boot mechanism" that can carry out the principles of this invention. Finally, it is expressly contemplated that any of the functions, procedures or processes described herein can be implemented using hardware, firmware or software, consisting of a computer-readable medium including program instructions executing on a computer, or a combination of hardware, firmware and/or software. Accordingly, this description is meant to be taken only by way of example, and not to otherwise limit the scope of the invention.

What is claimed is: